

PART 1

Mary Stevenson Cassatt was born in Pittsburgh, America on 22 May 1844 one of six children born to Robert and Katherine Cassatt. The family were wealthy, and her mother Katherine was a strong believer in educating women to be knowledgeable and socially active. So, it is not surprising that Mary Cassatt depicted the 19th century New Woman from the woman's perspective. She studied initially in the US, but spent most of her life in France, returning occasionally to America to see friends. Although she never married, she was enchanted by her nieces and nephews and excelled in painting children, who dominate her subject matter.

Mary Cassatt was born in 1844 in Allegheny City, later part of Pittsburgh, to a comfortably upper-middle-class family: her father was a successful stockbroker, and her mother belonged to a prosperous banking family. Her father's family were of French origin, having left France in 1662 with the surname Cossart. Her mother's ancestors came from Scotland around 1700.

In 1851, Cassatt's parents took her, along with her brothers and sisters, to France and Germany where they lived until 1855 before returning to the United States. Consequently, the children were fluent in both languages. At the age of 16, in 1860, Cassatt began two years of study at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where only 20% of the students were female. In 1865, disappointed with her art education in the United States, she eventually persuaded her father to let her continue her artistic training abroad. Despite their initial misgivings, they agreed, and she moved with her mother as chaperone, to Paris to study at the studio of Jean-Léon Gérôme.

She returned to the United States in 1870 because of the Franco-Prussian war and stayed with her parents. But her father refused to pay for her art materials and frustrated by a lack of artistic resources and opportunities, she travelled briefly to Chicago. In the autumn of that year, she returned to Paris.

In 1872, her painting Two Women Throwing Flowers During a Carnival was well received at the Paris Salon and was later sold. Later in 1874, Cassatt set up her own studio in Paris and was joined by her sister Lydia. Paris was experiencing the artistic innovations of Impressionism, but her family persuaded her to join the studio of Charles Chaplin, an academic painter. In 1875, she had a painting refused by the Salon and two more refused in 1877.

Later that year the artist Edgar Degas invited her to join the group of independent artists known as the Impressionists, she was delighted. She admired Degas's work, and they soon became close friends, often working side by side, encouraging and advising each other. She socialised with other artists in the group particularly Camille Pissarro who became a mentor and Berthe Morisot, the only other female in the group.

PART 2

For the 1879 Impressionist Exhibition Degas sent in the list of her works together with his own and he proceeded to guide her, not as a pupil, but as a respected ally. He taught her to love form and disregard useless detail and to adopt the practice of carrying a sketchbook to record what she saw.

The fourth Impressionist Exhibition in 1879, her first, was a success. One painting, of her sister Lydia in a Loge wearing a Pearl Necklace was subsequently sent with other paintings to the third exhibition of the Society of American Artists in New York. Some critics praised her work, but others were far from impressed. Impressionist painters were rare in America at the time and probably misunderstood. Cassatt continued to exhibit with the Impressionists in their Exhibitions of 1880 and 1881 and remained an active member of the Impressionist circle until around 1886.

Later that year she was included in the first major exhibition of Impressionist art in the United States, held in New York. She continued to specialize in scenes of women in domestic interiors, with an Impressionist emphasis on quickly captured moments of contemporary life, but she now expanded her technique from oil painting and drawing to pastels and printmaking. Japanese wood-block prints provided new lessons in composition and the Japanese use of black, something the Impressionists disapproved of, provided new inspiration.

Cassatt herself never married or had children yet by the mid 1880's she had become well known for her sensitive depictions of mothers and children. In 1893 she had an exhibition at Durand-Ruel's gallery in Paris. It was her first comprehensive exhibition and she had waited until she was almost fifty years old before making arrangements to hold it. She had a one-man show in New York in 1895, but the attendance was poor and sales few.

After 1900, Cassatt suffered from failing health and deteriorating eyesight. However, she remained close friends with other artists and the American collectors Harry and Louise Havemeyer.

In 1904 Cassatt was recognized for her cultural contributions by the French government, which awarded her the order of Chevalier of the Legion d'honneur.